R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 010 744 RC 000 682

BILINGUALISM--A PROBLEM OR AN ASSET.

BY- KNOWLTON, CLARK S.

PUB DATE 8 DEC 65

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$0.52 13P.

DESCRIPTORS- *BILINGUALISM, CULTURAL FACTORS, CULTURAL BACKGROUND, LEARNING DIFFICULTIES, *ENGLISH (SECOND LANGUAGE), NON ENGLISH SPEAKING, SPANISH, NEW MEXICO SCHOOLS, TEXAS SCHOOLS

THE AUTHOR DISCUSSES THE PROBLEMS RATHER THAN THE ASSETS ASSOCIATED WITH BILINGUALISM IN NEW MEXICO AND TEXAS SCHOOLS. HE STATES THAT MANY SPANISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS DO NOT LEARN BECAUSE THE SCHOOLS ARE BIASED AGAINST THEM IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS--(1) THE LOW TAXING ABILITY OF THE COMMUNITY PROVIDES ONLY FOR ILL-STAFFED AND ILL-EQUIPPED SCHOOLS, (2) THE STUDENTS CANNOT LEARN OTHER SUBJECT MATTER, AS EXPECTED, BEFORE THEY MASTER ENGLISH, AND (3) SPANISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN LEARN TO REGARD THEIR NATIVE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AS INFERIOR TO THAT OF THE ANGLO-AMERICANS. THE AUTHOR CONCLUDES THAT THE SCHOOLS SHOULD TEACH THESE STUDENTS IN THEIR NATIVE LANGUAGE WHILE THEY ARE MASTERING ENGLISH, TO ENABLE THEM TO LEARN OTHER SUBJECT MATTER EARLIER AND DEVELOP AN APPRECIATION OF THEIR NATIVE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE. HE SUGGESTS THAT CREATIVE SYNTHESIS OF THE SOUTHWEST CULTURES WILL PRODUCE CLASSROOMS IN WHICH THE FULLEST POTENTIAL OF THE ANGLO-AMERICAN, MEXICAN-AMERICAN, AND INDIAN CULTURES WILL BE ATTAINED. THIS IS A SPEECH PREPARED FOR DELIVERY TO THE MEETING OF STAFF AND FACULTY OF ANTHONY SCHOOL DISTRICT (ANTHONY, NEW MEXICO, DECEMBER 8, 1965). (CL)

ED 107744

BILINGUALISM: A PROBLEM OR AN ASSET

Dr. Clark S. Knowlton
Department of Sociology
Texas Western College

A speech prepared for delivery to the
Meeting of Staff and Faculty of Anthony School District
December 8, 1965
Anthony, New Mexico

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Mr. Trujillo, My fellow teachers: I deeply appreciate the kind invitation that has been extended to me to discuss with you the problems of bilingualism this afternoon. The theme of my talk will be, "Bilingualism: A Problem or an Asset." I have a deep and lasting interest in New Mexico. For four years I taught at New Mexico Highlands University, Las Vegas, New Mexico and became intensely interested in the Spanish-American people. Before then, I traveled over the state many times. Although I was lured away from New Mexico by the opportunity of developing a new department of Sociology at Texas Western College, New Mexico is still a major center of my research interests. I am among those who would not want to live very far away from New Mexico.

Social scientists in analyzing the history of the United States and of Latin America point out that in each nation certain institutions have played predominant roles in the formation and development of national culture. Major agreement exists among scholars that the extended patriarchal family has been a major factor in holding Brazil together as a nation and in creating a unique Brazilian culture. Spanish-Americans in turn have been deeply influenced by Roman Catholicism. In the United States, the public school system is believed to be the institution that more than any other has created a distinctive American civilization.

In very few nations are the schools permitted to retain custody of a child for as many years as in the United States. Few people have as much faith in the virtues of a universal public education as we do. Because of this, Americans demand and expect more from their schools than they do from other institutions. As Americans are not in complete agreement about what they expect from the schools, the schools are inevitably the center of controversy. Our schools are expected to perform such multiple and often contradictory roles as: (1) teach basic American cultural values,

(2) prepare students to enter college, (3) to develop character, (4) turn out graduates skilled enough to earn a living, (5) provide students with the social abilities needed to cooperate and to work together, and (6) to mould children of diverse ethnic and immigrant backgrounds into loyal American citizens.

Because of the rapidly changing complex, dangerous, and difficult world in which more and more Americans are becoming concerned with the ability of the present school system to adequately prepare Americans with the skills and abilities needed to function as well trained intelligent citizens able to cope with the many challenges offered by science, rapid social change, international problems, and rising rates of social disorganization such as juvenile delinquency, divorce, and others. Many critics point out that school systems are apt to be extremely conservative and unresponsive to new techniques and methods. They are apt to be timid and afraid of public controversy and debate. They are so inmeshed in bureaucratic routine that superintendents, principles, and teachers cannot function adequately because of the burden of regulations, forms, reports, and extracurricular assignments. These critics state that American school systems are too traditional in curriculum. In history, geography, and the social science they are oriented to Anglo-America and to Europe and contain all-too-little material on Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

One of the most important criticisms of sociologists and anthopologists analyzing the role and structure of the American school system, is that the majority of our schools emphasize middle class Anglo-American values and practically ignore the languages and cultures of minority groups, and the values, attitudes, and ways of life and urban poor. As a result, the schools have become dysfunctional among minority groups and the poor. They

do not really educate but are responsible for pushing large numbers of children out of the schools, for creating serious emotional and cultural problems that scar for life the personalities of thousands of other students, and for turning out children who lack the linguistic, cultural, vocational, and social skills needed to earn a living, to function as intelligent citizens, or to make constructive contributions to American culture.

Other authorities emphasize the fact that there is a growing reliance upon intelligence and aptitude tests by teachers, school administrators, and parents to grade students, and to determine their progress in school, their aptitudes, personality characteristics, and ability to learn. Our society is rapidly becoming a society of tests that determine whether or not the doors of opportunity will be opened or closed for our children. Children in many school districts are stereotyped and branded by their score on one or two tests.

Sociologists and anthropologists are quite unhappy about the careless use of tests prepared by middle-class urban Anglo-American psychologists and educators who are unaware that their tests are strongly influenced by their middle-class urban Anglo-American values and therefore strongly biased against rural, lower class, or minority group children whose values and ways of life may differ from those of surburban Anglo America. At the present time, there are very few intelligence or aptitude tests free of cultural or class biases. Thousands of children have been seriously damaged by teachers, parents, and others who evaluate children on the bases of one or two tests and stereotype him as a slow learner, below normal in intelligence, or emotionally unprepared for school work.

I have personally talked with many teachers of Spanish-American children in northern New Mexico who have strongly affirmed that Spanish-American children lack the ability to learn. They have said, "Look, so many Spanish

American children have to repeat the first grade two or three times.""They just can't learn as fast as Anglo-American children." "They lack the native ability to do school work." "If you don't believe me, just check their test scores." The truth is that the present school systems of New Mexico and Texas in spite of the work of truly heroic and dedicated superintendents, principals, and teachers, is absolutely biased against the Spanish-speaking child. The children know it and drop out of the struggle pushed out by the schools.

Since the American occupation of the Southwest, controversy has raged over the attitude of state and local school systems toward the Spanish language and the Spanish-American culture. The philosophy of the state and local school systems is imbued with the traditional middle class Anglo American value that all minority and immigrant groups should be required to abandon their native languages and cultures, give up their group identity, and become absorbed as individuals into the dominant group, usually on a lower class level. If any group resists full acculturation it is regarded as somewhat uncivilized, un-American, and potentially subversive. There is a complete unwillingness to accept the idea that a native born American who happens to want to speak Spanish, German, or Polish and to retain many of the values of his native culture might well be a loyal American. As a result, the full force of the educational system in the Southwest has been directed toward the eradication of both the Spanish language and the Spanish-American or Mexican-American cultures.

The results have been very serious. The Spanish-speaking child required to attend school taught in a strange and alien language passes through a period of emotional and intellectual confusion that may handicap him for life. The average Spanish-speaking child loses from three to four years in struggling to acquire enough academic English to do school work. Large numbers give up the struggle and drop out as soon as they can. The rest tend

to fall behind the Anglo-American child for three to five years.

As the Spanish-speaking child has seldom mastered the basic grammatical concepts of the Spanish language before he is forced to deal with English, he seldom learns either Spanish or English well. The school districts of the Southwest have the unique honor of graduating students who are functionally illiterate in two languages. The ability of these students to find adequate employment or to go on to college is gravely handicapped by their linguistic confusion.

This is a condition that exists because of a prejudiced, irrational, and extremely parochial educational philosophy. Many nations throughout the world have bilingual populations. At first most of them utilized the national language as the sole language of instruction for linguistic minority groups. After a long process of confusion and educational failure, such countries as England, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Russia, Mexico, and Canada have started to educate all children in the language of their home at least in the elementary grades. They have found that by doing this the educational progress of the minority group children is accelerated. Such children are also free of the harmful emotional complications that are a byproduct of the older system of using the national language exclusively in the teaching of minority children.

Bilingualism in the Southwest has been used as a convenient whipping boy or scapeboat upon which all of the educational deficiencies of the Spanish-speaking children can be conveniently blamed. It then becomes easy to hide the fact that no equality of educaticnal opportunities exist in New Mexico or in Texas. As the majority of Spanish-speaking children live in urban slums or in rural villages, it is convenient to point to bilingualism as the factor responsible for their educational deficiences. One can then forget that in these areas the school buildings are poor, antiquated, or

simply inadequate. Because of the lower taxing power of poverty areas, local teacher salaries are inadequate, the schools are sadly lacking in equipment, and only the basic core curriculum can be taught. A Spanish-speaking child in Mora, Penasco, or in la Union or Anthony does not have the same educational opportunity as an Anglo child in Albuquerque, Carlsbad, or Roswell. Unfortunately, these larger urban centers do not realize that the products of the poorer slum and rural village schools will migrate to them in search of employment. As they are not adequately prepared, they create serious economic and social problems that to a large degree could be averted if all children in the state were given equal educational opportunities.

In the United States scattered school districts in Florida, New York, and in Laredo, Texas, are abandoning the older system of using English exclusively and are now teaching in both Spanish and in English. One school district near Miami, for example, is teaching all courses in Spanish in the morning and in English in the afternoon. In New York, Puerto Rican children are learning much faster than before. As a result of the new experiments in the use of Spanish, the state of Colorado has now set the example by repealing its law that English must be the only language of instruction. It is time that New Mexico and Texas followed this example. In both New Mexico and in Texas, state laws will permit the experimental use of Spanish as a teaching language.

Using Spanish as the basic language of instruction in the elementary grades does not presuppose the abandonment of English. Every citizen must acquire a functioning knowledge of English in order to participate fully in our national life. Unfortunately the methods now used to teach English to

non-English speaking children in the majority of our school systems are completely out of date. The average English teacher teaches English to Spanish-speaking children the same way that she does to native English-speaking children. The result is that few Spanish-speaking children acquire an effective command of the English language. This method is completely contrary to all the basic principles of linguistics. Teachers should be specially trained in the new methods recently worked out for the teaching of English to non-English speaking children and by the adoption of all the modern developments in electronic equipment and language laboratories. These methods are now being used in military establishments and in universities and colleges throughout America. Unfortunately, they have not yet been adopted on a large scale by elementary and secondary schools.

The basic goal of schools in the Spanish-speaking areas of the Southwest should be to produce students who can effectively speak, read, and write both Spanish and English, and to comprehend both Spanish and Anglo cultural values. To achieve this, both English and Spanish should be used as basic teaching languages. Many recent experiments have shown that children who master their native languages well can more efficiently learn another language than can children who have not completely learned their native languages. Recent tests in Canada show that children who are bilingual when matched with mono-lingual children of the same socio-economic backgrounds learn faster, progress at a more accelerated rate, and are more intellectually mature.

Furthermore, a school district that effectively prepared its students in both Spanish and English would be helping to fill an important national need. As the United States is engaged in a prolonged struggle for survival against

the Communists, it must compete for the hearts and souls of men all over the world. One of the most serious and notorious American weakness is that there are so very few Americans who speak more than one language or who have a real knowledge of the cultural values of other parts of the world. Americans are seriously handicapped by their cultural and linguistic isolation.

Therefore, a minority group in the United States such as the Spanish-Americans and Mexican-Americans who possess a language and a culture shared by millions outside the United States should be treated as a national resource of great importance. The schools should encourage and support the existence of minority cultures and languages. Thus, the Spanish-speaking people of the Southwest could become an effective bridge of communication between Latin America and Anglo America. The need is so great for bi-lingual college graduates, that such a person has a definite competitive advantage over the mono-lingual individual.

Now to return to the emotional problems of the Spanish-speaking child fighting blindly for survival in an English-speaking school system. As Spanish is not used in the school, and as he is often punished for speaking Spanish during school hours, the Spanish-speaking school child comes to regard it as an inferior language to English. He also feels that he is inferior to English-speaking children and that his family and his culture are inferior to theirs. This deeply rooted feeling of inferiority may often paralyze his intellectual and cultural potentialities. It weakens his ability to compete with the English-speaking person. Also many Spanish-speaking children develop considerable self-hatred developed against themselves and against their families and their minority group and its culture. This is a tragic price to pay for an ideological regidity that forbides the use of Spanish in the classroom.

Furthermore there is little in the mass of reading materials, textbooks, or instructional material that has any meaning at all to the life of a poverty stricken Spanish-speaking child. The material portrays a middle class Anglo suburban world of which he is completely ignorant. The great cultural contributions of the Spanish and of the Mexicans to the cultural development of the Southwest tend to be ignored. The child cut off from his own cultural roots comes to believe that his people have contributed little of any value to human civilization.

The Spanish-speaking child is also in almost complete ignorance about the important cultural, economic, and social progress taking place south of the Rio Grande. He is unaware that Latin American novelists, essayists, and poets are translated into all of the major languages of the world and that they rate very highly in the modern literary world. He knows nothing about the great artistic traditions of Mexico, Brazil, or Argentina. He is in ignorance of the fact that Latin American scientists, engineers, and statesmen are commanding a world reputation. The tortilla curtain along the Rio Grande cuts him off as it does the Anglo child from all contact with the dynamic, rapidly growing cultures of the Latin American countries on the other side of the Rio Grande.

In closing, I would like to paint two contrasting pictures of the Southwest. One is a Southwest that has been completely anglicized. The Spanish-speaking and Indian groupings have been completely absorbed. The entire population is standardized and homogenized. It is no better or no worse than the state of Kansas, Oklahoma, or Nebraska. It has become an intellectual and cultural backwater, a parochial isolated stagnant back-

water. The other picture is that of a Southwest in which the full flowering of Anglo American, Mexican American, and Indian cultures and languages has been encouraged. It has become a cultural and linguistically plural region. The cross fertilization of cultures has created a regional culture that is richer in art, literature, education, science, and perhaps even in technology than any of the neighboring regions in the United States. The Southwest would thus have a cosmopolitan culture open to all the cultural currents that flow from both Latin and Anglo America. It could be a region where the two great cultural areas meet and blend in a creative synthesis.

What Southwest do you want for yourselves and for your children? Which would provide the greatest cultural, and economic opportunities for its children? You as superintendents, principals, and teachers will determine by the cultural and linguistic climates of your schools which Southwest will prevail. If you are experimental, flexible, and alert to new ideas and techniques and if you use both the Spanish and English languages as teaching instruments, the second Southwest will flower out of your schools. If you bring into your classes abundant materials from the contributions of both Anglo and Latin America, your students will be better prepared to live and to function in an enriched regional culture as well as in the international world of tomorrow. It is up to you, which Southwest do you want?

END

DEPT. OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
U.S. OFFICE OF
EDUCATION

ERIC

DATE FILMED

7·24·67